

EXILE FROM "GOD'S COUNTRY"

When Ben Habersham, of Windmill Fame, Thought He Killed a Man in Painted Rock

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ABOUT '85, if I remember rightly, there was an almighty frost in Florida, almost as bad as the one of '91, when the orange-trees were killed as far south as India River; and that was why Ben Habersham shifted stakes and came into Painted Rock. It was also the reason why I knew him, and it was the reason that Susy Habersham became acquainted with Samuel I. Weekes, who owned a cattle-ranch on the upper waters of Wolf Creek, a saloon at Big Springs and a store in Painted Rock itself.

Habersham was a big, loose-jointed, slop-built "Simple Simon," who took to erecting windmills for irrigation, as he had raked up an agency for some new kind of wind fakement on the strength of which he came West. He worked for himself at first, and then became a partner, as far as windmills were concerned, with Weekes. He fitted up a number of them in the town. One he put up for Ginger Gillett, who had a great notion for flowers and fruit, both hard things to raise in the neighborhood of Painted Rock. He fixed another for my friend Gedge, the gambler from Georgia, who had a shack outside the city limits with what he delighted to call a "park." It was four acres of dust, sand and alkali and prairie-dogs, and his "vines" were a measly lot of creepers that died at the first south wind, if any survived the March northers. Habersham called Florida "God's country." When a man out West does that you may reckon him a failure. The man who doesn't fail is he who takes enough root for the time to forget the State he came from. That is what Ginger Gillett said and did.

"I don't reckon to palaver none about where I came from," said Ginger with decision, "nor do I reckon to wail any about what I left behind. There's a complete and finished set of plumb-rank failures howling in Painted Rock about this and that State being 'God's kentry.' They make me sick and tired. 'God's kentry' is finished, and the State of Texas is still in our hands to work up and put the polish on. But the women is the worst at it. They don't remind me none of the women of '49 that old-timers tells about. They had grit and could stand off Injuns. These ladies cayn't stand off a mosquito, and they weep sadly at a centipede. Mis' Habersham's that kind, and cayn't cut a steak without making faces at the jint she hacks it off of with averted face. The women from God's kentry ain't fit to raise Texans. They raise too much riot over trifles."

But she was a pretty little woman, and even the fastidious Ginger Gillett lowered his bull voice in her presence and was exceedingly polite when he met her on Main-st. The cow-boys said she was "a daisy," when they swaggered past her with cropped heads, a tooth-brush in their waistcoat pockets, and a high opinion of themselves in their little minds.

"There'll be trouble over Mis' Habersham yet," said "Keno" Gedge, who knew the world and had a wife who had been pretty enough to bring one man to the grave and two into a hospital before she quieted down in double harness. "She's a danger to this lonely society of bachelors, my son, and you can lay what you like on it. If I was Habersham, I'd see she had no sort of conversation with Sam Weekes. Weekes ain't to be trusted with women—you can see that in his eye, if his record didn't prove it."

They said his record did prove it.

"Does Habersham know it?" I asked.

"Habersham don't know nothin'," said Gedge bitterly. "He knows enough about oranges to be froze out of Florida, and enough about windmills to set one up in any park that won't draw water."

"Keno" Gedge, according to Habersham believed that a windmill created water in a dry well.

"We ain't on good terms over that dry windmill," said Gedge, "or I'd get Mrs. Gedge to drop him a hint that Weekes is after Mrs. Habersham. He's the only man in Painted Rock that don't see it."

That was true enough, as I found out after a month or so. There was an extraordinary reluctance among the quieter inhabitants of the town to say anything about the case. It was no one's business but Habersham's, and Habersham was just the man to kill there and then the fool who warned him. Nevertheless there was talk, and the baser-minded sort soon averred that the talk had a sound basis to go on. There was a strange row



"I'm Not in Windmills Any More!" Said Habersham.

about this in the American Saloon, which was characteristic of the place and its people, and for the matter of that of the West likewise. It was started by Sibley Ranger from Double Mountain Fork, who used to come into town and fill up beyond any limit of discretion once a fortnight.

"Haow's George Weekes' huntin' progressin'?" he asked Gedge, who was sitting on a bench with Pillsbury.

"Did you speak to me?" asked Gedge, with a danger-signal in his voice.

"To you, 'Keno' Gedge," said Ranger, "to be sure I did. I asked how's Weekes' hunt after the Floridy lady goin' on? Is she caught yet?"

Gedge rose from his seat and walked up to him. He was little, but was as hard as wire, and now he was in a dangerous rage. "Mr. Ranger," he said in a voice that had a rasp in it, "do you know that it's admitted on all hands that you're the biggest fool that ever showed up in Painted Rock?"

Ranger's hand was lying on the bar and Gedge put his on it. Ranger found that alien grip immovable.

"You ain't for startin' a difficulty with me for sayin' what everyone says?" he asked quietly enough.

"If you say it again there will be trouble," said Gedge. "Do you understand me? There'll be serious trouble, and I don't want to hev' my business interrupted by being obliged to leave town till your funeral is forgotten."

Not a soul spoke a word. The bartender wiped a glass, put a bottle straight and stood quietly expectant.

"You talk high," said Ranger.

"I talk down to you," said Gedge.

Ranger showed for once an adequate sense of the situation. "Well, if you put it that way," he said, "I reckon on I take it back. I'm not in your class as a shot. I own it, and if I was to follow my unreasonable desires and bash you with this tumbler I know I'd be dead and no use

to my dependent relatives. I take it back, Gedge. I'll say no more about it. Set up the drinks, Tom."

And Habersham walked into the saloon just as we all made a move for the bar. No one thought any the worse of Ranger for "taking water." There are ways of

doing it, and fool or none, he did it right.

"Habersham, drink with me and these guests," said Ranger. "Me and Gedge has been arguin', and Gedge hez won, I own it."

"What's that trouble?" asked Habersham, laughing.

"Gedge let on he reckoned me a fool," replied Ranger, "and a keetle discussion ensued. I own I am a fool, and I'll stand nose-paint to prove it. How's windmills going? Is the wind sufficient to send 'em round? I'm thinkin' of havin' one fixed over to my ranch, and I'll grow roses ag'in' 'Keno' at his park."

That was the end of the trouble. But when talk had got so far, it was bound to go farther, and it did. The elite of Painted Rock looked shy at Mrs. Habersham, who apparently never got so much as a hint upon the scandal. At any rate, she never wilted under the public gaze and went about as gaily as ever. Gedge talked to me about her, and talked a little gloomily.

"One woman is all I care to understand," he said, "and I own freely after twenty-five years of matrimony that Mrs. Gedge is frequent as hard to fathom as Ginger Gillett when he starts bluffin' at poker. He's the best amateur at kyards in the country, and Pillsbury owns it as I do. For all I know, Mis' Habersham may be had down to bed-rock, or she may be no more than a pretty fool. There's times I put up one hypothesis, and there's times I argue from the other. Women are shorely sad enigmas and apt to cause woe. If Habersham hears any hint of what is spoke of I've a notion he'll go plumb mad and bring Mr. Weekes' career to a premature close—whether with justice or without I ain't just now inclined to state. There are times when the worst views of human natur' come natural, and therefore I'll wander over to the drug store and get Bailey to quote me a price on pills."

The next day I rode to Snyder, Scurry County, and stayed a week with Chapman, who kept the Snyder Saloon, and I missed the newer developments of the Habersham story. But I came in for the conclusion at any rate, for I met Sibley Ranger riding out when I came within ten miles of Painted Rock on my way back.

"Howdy!" said Sibley, and I replied "Howdy!" with all the cordiality of the prairie. He pulled up close to me, and our horses put their noses together.

"There's goin' to be trouble over to Painted Rock," said Sibley Ranger.

"What trouble?" I asked.

"About Mis' Habersham and Sam Weekes. Some galoot hez bin fillin' up Ben's mind with suspicions about her, and they say he ain't spoke to a soul this three days. I met him by the court-house and he was ez white as raw cotton, and was talkin' to himself. When a man does that it's real dangerous: there's trouble afoot, to be sure. I hankered some to stay and see it out, but I'd fixed to see old Mackenzie over to my place about them steers, and if I missed him he'd be worse to deal with than a rattler. I never did see such a man, plumb locoed he is at times. Gedge is very sore about the Habersham: he's stuck on Mis' Habersham himself, eh?"

I thought Sibley Ranger was safer at Double Mountain Fork than in town, and said so.

"Waal, I dessay," he drawled, "my tongue's my cross, and it'll get me into trouble shore, I own it. But if you hurry up you may see the crisis. The crisis is comin' along, and I ain't a jedge of crises. There was that look about Ben Habersham which naturally eventuates in the deadly exhibition of a double-pronged scatter-gun, or I'm the closest example of high discretion in Northwest Texas. So long!"

I reached town by way of Wolf Creek at sundown, and the first man I saw on the street was Ginger Gillett. The city marshal seemed worried.

"Mr. Gillett, I fear your responsibilities are weighing on you," I said. "You are wearing a sad expression this moment. Who's been shot and killed since I saw you?"

"Peace reigns so far," said Gillett, "and there's